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Personal Learning Networks as a Support for Transitioning MSc Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the lessons learned from an attempt to evaluate an online non-assessed module which was run for the first time in 2016 as part of a larger MSc Social Work module taken by 26 final year students. It uses a Real World Research Approach to consider the lessons which can be learned from research enquiry which yields an unexpected or disappointing response.

The paper discusses these lessons learned from initial results in the context of literature on Personal Learning Networks (PLNs) (sometimes referred to as personal learning environments). It uses this literature to explore the context within which students might use PLNs as they transition into becoming newly qualified social workers. It concludes by suggesting that further enquiry into the role of PLNs is required with a further study planned for the next academic year.

Keywords: Personal Learning Network; transitions; newly qualified; social work

Introduction

This paper reflects on the lessons learned from an attempt to evaluate an online non-assessed module which was run for the first time in 2016 as part of a larger MSc Social Work module taken by 26 final year students. The online module was run jointly by the University of Dundee and Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) and introduced a range of social media tools to students as a means by which to build Personal Learning Networks (PLNs). That is a network through which you can find and share information, knowledge and experience – in this case online (IRISS, 2014). The module was introduced as the students were embarking on their final placement, and ran for six weeks with each week introducing a new tool and online activities for students to complete, which encouraged experimentation with a range of social media tools such as Twitter and Scoop.it. The module was optional and non-assessed. However, students could gain a Scottish Social Services Council open badge on completion. As part of the process the university lecturer and IRISS staff agreed to undertake a small study evaluating the impact which developing a PLN has on students experiences of transitioning from student social worker to Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW).

Literature review

The idea of PLNs has grown in currency over the last decade as social media, in particular tools such as Twitter and Scoop It! have become a feature of the information landscape. A review of NQSW revealed that there remain gaps in a NQSW's skills and knowledge as they transition from student social worker into practice. Their findings, however, show that "[t]he majority of NQSW respondents value the process of continuing professional development to help fill knowledge and skill gaps" (Grant, Sheridan, & Webb, 2014, p. 8). Literature suggests that these gaps might be filled by the use of emerging technologies such as blogs to support continued learning. Merchant (2009) considers how Web 2.0 technologies can support 'informal learning'. Gee's (2004 as cited in Merchant, 2008, p. 108) 'affinity spaces' and Wenger's (1998) 'communities of practice' are examples of social spaces which can foster online learning networks. Literature also suggests that students are increasingly "integrating social media in their academic practice both formally and informally" (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012, p. 2). Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012) also discuss the challenge of moving from Learning Management Systems (LMS) to independent learning not proscribed by the institution, referred to by them as Personal Learning Environments (PLEs). Their use of the term PLE has much in common with what we refer to in this paper as PLNs, and their suggestion is that these be viewed as more than technology but also as a pedagogy. This transition from institution to self-directed learning in practice might happen without intervention by the course team, but I would argue that the PLN module seeks to offer an opportunity to highlight the pedagogical value of PLNs in supporting students to see their continued post qualifying learning as informal and connected.

Methodology

This paper uses a real world research (RWR) approach to consider the lessons learned from the initial attempts to introduce this module, acknowledging the messy and unpredictable nature of research which is undertaken in a complex and busy environment. Robson suggests that in RWR "participants are viewed as helping to construct the reality with the researchers" (2002, p. 27). Ethical approval was sought for the study through the school research ethics committee, with specific focus included on the mitigation of power by including a reassurance that their engagement in both the module and the research study were voluntary. Students were provided with a consent form. The dual role of researcher and practitioner presents challenges which are considered within a RWR approach. In this case being both researcher and module lead might create a perception by the students that participation in the module and the research study, although optional, would be viewed positively by myself in my role as module lead. Low levels of engagement suggest that students felt able to make independent decisions regarding participation. They felt able to exercise independent judgement on this, however the follow-up question did elicit apologetic responses from students who had not engaged as much as they had intended or at all in some cases.

The module was designed by IRISS for social service workers and modified to meet the needs of social work students. It consisted of six weeks of online activity where those enrolled were asked to read materials, to try out a range of social media tools and then post their reflections on their experience to a discussion board. There were 26 Postgraduate students enrolled on the module with data on active participation being captured via discussion board activity. A follow-up questionnaire with an open question was sent out after the module to all 26 participants to elicit feedback on their reasons for limited or non-participation. This was sent to all 26 students whether they participated or not, eight students replied across all age groups of whom two were male and six female. Of those responding four had engaged in the activity and four had not. Data was then analysed thematically to establish identify factors for none or limited participation. These are discussed in the findings section below.

RWR also acknowledges the embedded nature of research, proposing that "human actions can only be understood in terms of their place within […] social reality." (Robson, 2002, p. 38). This approach helps to explore the nature of human responses which can only be understood within the context of their real, lived experiences. In this case the timing of the module and the proposed study of it within a very busy few months of the programme appeared to impact on the behaviour of students in response to this task. This paper, therefore, seeks to use this understanding to inform the next stage of the study, adopting a reflexive approach to respond to the nature of the social reality within which the module was situated. The research has adopted a pragmatic approach which "enables researchers to be flexible in their investigative techniques, as they attempt to address a range of research questions that arise" (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005, p. 383). The follow-up study will adopt the same method of questionnaires backed up by reflections built in to the module structures but will also build in a focus group post-module to explore in more detail participants' experiences. The second part of the study will follow the student beyond their university study into their first year in practice allowing us to gather data on the impact of PLNs on NQSW in practice. This inductive approach should lead us to an understanding which is grounded in the real experiences of students leading busy and pressured lives.

Findings

A short thematic analysis of the questionnaire feedback resulted in two key themes which were 'priorities' and 'time management'.

The module was introduced during a final lecture slot before students went out onto placement. Six students engaged actively, i.e. posted one or more comments, with student participation tailing off towards the end. Only one student posted on the discussion board in weeks four and five, however three students posted on the reflection activity in week six. It is impossible to measure participation of students who did not post on discussion boards, therefore the next study will measure both the engagement on the discussion board and the students self-reporting of engaging with the given activities or simply reading and listening. The term commonly used for presence in online spaces without contribution is 'lurking'. Crawford describes lurking as "a common pejorative term for those who are present in public online spaces but do not prominently speak up." (2009, p. 525) She argues that using the term has hindered the way in which we view quiet online presence where listening may be a valuable part of the online experience. The first finding is that to measure the true value of the module we need to build in methods of students self-reporting the change in behaviour which has occurred as a result of the range of ways which they engaged with the module.

The second finding was in relation to the timing of the module, IRISS were able to report that the same module run in a different HE location had a much higher take-up. They suggested that the difference in take-up may be due to the lack of time to dedicate to the course due to placement. Running the course during class time should support participation – with more time to do it and face-to-face time with course lead and classmates. This suggestion was confirmed through student feedback with a very strong theme emerging of priorities which were competing and which very prioritised as more important.

> *I found it difficult when on placement to find time to sit and complete the work.* (Participant 1)

> *I think you may have got a higher response if this was undertaken prior to people going out on placement.* (Participant 2)

This confirmation of our original belief allowed us to remain engaged with the idea of the module as having potential value. Understanding the roots of the students' reluctance based on other pressures enables us to understand their behaviour in the context of an education system which places value on certain activities in particular compulsory and assessed activities. In her study on the Networked Student Model, Drexler (2010) identifies similar difficulties in keeping students engaged in online and self-directed

activity. She concluded that this model of working "affords the learner more control and responsibility, […]" therefore "[…] the teacher must continually balance this freedom with enough structure to keep students on task and engaged in the learning process." (Drexler, 2010, p. 275)

> *I didn't engage with the online module as I my final placement with *** is really busy and it was an extra thing to think about on top of the ROA, consultation and CPD event.* (Participant 3)

Seeking an understanding of the context within which the activity is situated helped the researcher to consider changes which need to be made when planning the introduction of this module next year. All but one of respondents to the post activity questionnaire took a pragmatic approach to workload priorities:

> *I'm sure if time prevailed I would have more of an in-depth look, but for most placement is the be-all and end-all!* (Participant 4)

> *Activity was not compulsory.'* (Participant 5)

> *I felt that I may have not viewed this as a priority compared to working agreements and proposal forms although the module would have been beneficial.* (Participant 6)

This suggests students are prioritising mandatory activity. Underlying the non-assessed nature of the module is the implicit message we send to students about what matters. "It provides an indication of what the institution gives priority to in making a judgement." (Boud & Falchikov, 2007, p. 21). Little surprise then that students responded to that message at a time when pressures on time were acute, by opting out of something which they perceived as having no immediate currency for them.

Building on findings

Rajagopal, Joosten-ten Brinkle and Sloep's (2010) literature review on personal learning networks suggest that there is a need to review the use of PLNs as social workers learn in practice through both experience and social interaction. They argue that a better understanding of the strategies used by social workers when developing PLNs is needed in order to suggest technologies which will support this. This along with Grant et al.'s (2016) findings that NQSWs expressed concern about "the lack of continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities made available to them in their new workplace environments" (p. 502) suggests there may be value in starting to build these skills and habits on a student social worker level. As opportunities for more formal CPD appear to be limited, it may be that PLNs can fill a gap in learning for NQSWs as they transition from student to the world of work.

Having been somewhat reassured that the students' reporting of their reasons for non-engagement with the PLN module tallied with our own suppositions as to what might have happened, the researcher agreed with our IRISS partners that we should run and evaluate the PLN module again, offering it on campus before the students have the additional workload which comes along with their placement. At this point IRISS will step back, and the university will run the module and carry out the research. A follow-up study will be conducted into this new iteration of the module using a RWR approach to build on the lessons learned from this small study.

In their literature review of PLEs, Buchem, Attwell and Torres (2011) discuss the concepts of 'ownership' and 'division of labour' and note that "[w]hilst some researchers see PLEs as broadening learning domains to include both the institutional and wider social domains, others focus more on how institutional resources might be 'consumed' within a PLE" (p. 28). For the purposes of this module and the scaffolding of transition to NQSW it is the former we are aiming to achieve. The situating of learning networks outwith the institution is crucial to the role of PLNs as a support to students transitioning from institutionally bound learning to self-directed learning and has the advantage of democratising learning and development. Although there are issues identified with the non-assessed nature of this module, for the reasons outlined here, it is appropriate to stick with this approach.

Conclusions

The initial findings although tentative suggest that students view PLNs as having some potential value in terms of developing their networks as they transition from academia into the world of work. There is limited research in this area in the field of social work. However, studies of teachers are more extensive and suggest that "professional learning could benefit if teachers are given opportunities to form their own professional networks and engage in learning that is social in nature, based on cooperation, collaboration and communication" (Tour, 2017, p. 17). These findings alongside this study suggest that further inquiry into the role of PLNs as a support for extending learning beyond graduation into practice is needed. This allies with Grant et al.'s (2016) findings that NQSWs perceive there to be a lack of CPD opportunities. Our challenge is to find a way to make this opportunity one which is delivered in a way which is manageable for our students, thereby giving us the opportunity to study the impact it has on their experience of transitioning into practice.

Biography

Shona Robertson is a lecturer in the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Dundee and is in the early stages of her research career. She teaches on both campus based and online courses and is interested in exploring the use of online resources to support learners at all stages in their education and post-education careers.

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